

Private Pain, Public Trust: Why Leaders Must Be Open About Failure

Christians were shocked last week after learning that Benny and Suzanne Hinn are divorcing. Do ministers owe us an explanation for their failures?

Judging by the calls and e-mails I received last week, charismatic Christians were confused and dismayed when the *Los Angeles Times* broke the news that healing evangelist Benny Hinn and his wife, Suzanne, are getting divorced. The comments I heard were mostly sympathetic: "I am so grieved." "This is a wake-up call." "This is heartbreaking." "I'm praying for the Hinn's."

And a few people were angry: "What is happening?" "Here we go again." "This is why the secular world looks at us and laughs!"

"Every Christian has access to God's mercy when he makes mistakes. But a leader is held to a higher standard of accountability and disclosure."

Hinn's ministry, based in Texas, eventually posted an official

statement online to quell the public outcry. It says:

Pastor Benny Hinn and his immediate family were shocked and saddened to learn of this news on February 17 without any previous notice. The couple has been married for more than 30 years, and although Pastor Hinn has faithfully endeavored to bring healing to their relationship, those efforts failed and were met with the petition for divorce that was filed without notice.

Both Pastor Hinn and the board of directors of the church ask for the prayers of ministry partners and friends as the Hinn family walks through this difficult season. Pastor Hinn also wants everyone to know that he remains firmly and unquestionably committed to God's calling—as he continues in his thirty-sixth year of ministry—to take the life-saving and miracle-working Gospel of Jesus Christ to the nations through crusades, broadcasts, and mission outreaches.

I'm grateful that Hinn released this statement, but I hope he plans to say more soon. He has influenced far too many people around the world to keep us wondering why his marriage is ending.

The charismatic segment of the church has endured a long string of divorces, moral failures and embarrassing scandals among high-profile ministers. The most

recent wave began
in 2006 with Ted Haggard's fall (which did not end in divorce,
thanks to Gayle
Haggard's tough decision to forgive Ted). Megachurch pastors
Randy and Paula
White of Tampa, Fla., announced their break-up in 2007; then
came similar
news from Juanita Bynum and Thomas Weeks III in Atlanta,
followed by Jamal Bryant
and his wife, Gizelle, of Empowerment Temple in Baltimore. And
on and on it
goes.

Part of the fallout
of these scandals was the widespread disillusionment among
people who follow
these leaders. We naturally expect ministers to be models of
Christ-like behavior,
and they have a solemn charge to do so. When shepherds fail,
the sheep often
faint.

We've even seen
this in the secular world. When politicians or celebrity
athletes experience
personal failure, the public wants an explanation. Tiger
Woods, for example,
waited three long months before finally hosting a press
conference last week to
admit what he called "irresponsible
and selfish behavior."

Of course no
minister is perfect, and every Christian has access to God's
mercy when he
makes mistakes. But a spiritual leader is held to a higher
standard of
accountability and disclosure. Those who assume a public

ministerial role incur
a “stricter judgment,” according to James 3:1. That means a leader can’t have a moral or ethical breakdown and then just hide it, ignore it or laugh it off.

It also means he can’t spin the statement to his advantage. The church, of all places, should be a No Spin Zone. We must take full responsibility, and that includes publicly owning up to our failures—and stepping down from the pulpit, if necessary, for however long it takes to find healing.

Please understand that I am not attacking a brother in Christ. I honor Benny Hinn for the fact that many people have come to the Lord in his evangelistic events around the world. I also know that leaders often are hit with the worst spiritual attacks because they are on the front lines. I believe we owe it to Benny and Suzanne to pray that their marriage can be restored.

Yet in this season of moral and spiritual crisis we must appeal to all those in public ministry to handle their charge with care. Of all people on earth, those who preach the Gospel of Truth must tell the truth.

J.

Lee Grady was editor of *Charisma* for 11 years and is now serving as contributing editor. You can find him on Twitter at leegrady.

Three days after this column was posted, Benny Hinn released this statement to his supporters.